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"WHAT HAPPENED TO OUR SENSE OF JUSTICE?" TRACING AGENCY AND CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN A YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

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Abstract

Tracing the nature of critical engagement and agency among youth in a participatory action research (PAR) collective, the study attends to the manner in which critical engagement and agency developed over time for the youth researchers. The focus of the project was to conduct a survey among ninth grade students concerning their early high school experience, using participatory methods in data collection, analysis, and reporting back. Data collection included participant observation and review of footage of project activities, field notes, and the youth researchers' auto-ethnographic texts and creative products. Access to the ninth grade students was clearly achieved, and they were informed first among many stakeholders about the results of the survey; however, the classroom setting proved challenging in terms of facilitating critical engagement, compromising youth researchers' sense of agency. The university setting served as a site conducive to inquiry and agency for the youth.

Keywords*:* participatory action research, youth researchers, agency, critical engagement.

In this study we trace the nature of critical engagement among youth as they participate in critical inquiry and social action concerning opportunities and constraints within the educational system. A collective of youth, an educator/community member, and university faculty and students worked together over an academic year to study the early high school experiences of youth. The context is a high poverty urban district in the Midwest. Our particular interest is in the process we engaged together in data collection, analysis, and reporting back as

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we drew increasingly from a critical interpretive lens. The project includes a mix of out-of-school and in-school time, with the concentration of gatherings occurring in participatory action research (PAR) sessions at the university. The research question guiding the study is as follows: How do critical engagement and agency develop over time within a collective of youth, educators, and university members in a PAR project within an urban school district?

Conceptual Framework

The paper is guided by a strong tradition of participatory action research in psychology and education involving youth (Cammarota & Fine, 2008), often employing the arts. This work is also informed by critical theory, and thus attends to history, policy, and an ecology of power (Fals-Borda, 1985; Freire, 1970) in its analysis of data and in the reflexive study of the research process. Our conceptualization of critical engagement involves the following commitments: recognition youth bring to research their experiential knowledge; critical analysis of data toward fostering critical consciousness; youth leadership in partnership with adults; attention to structural intersectionality, where multiple axes of inequity are frequently experienced in urban settings by youth of color in low-income and other marginalized communities; and inquiry toward collective action and social change (Fox, Mediratta, Ruglis, Stoudt, Shah, & Fine, 2010, p. 632).

The youth researchers attended seven high schools in the district, including schools on the east, west, and south sides of the city, each of which represents particular racial, ethnic, and socio-economic communities. The schools the youth researchers attend are both comprehensive high schools with deep roots in neighborhoods and several theme-based schools opened in the 2010-2011 school year as part of the district's plan for transformation. The seven schools represent about one-fourth of the district's high schools. The district is 100% economically disadvantaged, with some variation in the degree to which students experience concentrated poverty in their neighborhoods and schools. The state designation for the participating seven high schools in 2011-2012 ranged from effective to continuous improvement to academic emergency.[1]

Methods

Our data collection for this study included our participant observation and review of footage of project activities, field notes, and the youth researchers' auto-ethnographic texts. Our data sources were journal entries by youth researchers[2]; our field notes; video recordings of project activities; and the creative products developed by the youth researchers at different phases of the project to engage others in the study topic.

In this paper we do not directly address the results of the ninth grade survey that was the focus of the PAR project. When we do discuss survey results, it is primarily to underscore data that reveal the development of critical engagement within the collective over the duration of the PAR project. Survey results are in the process of being reported through other scholarly products created by the youth researchers and their adult collective members (Cooke et al., 2015).

Findings

To pursue our question regarding critical engagement and agency within our PAR collective over the duration of one year of the survey project, we focus on one team from a

particular high school and the youth researchers' deliberation. We look at the experience of this team at three moments in the life of the project, the first and third taking place in a school setting and the second occurring at the university.

You have a choice
to either take the survey
and speak up for you education
or just leave your education
the way it is
- Marcel

Seeking Space for Critical Engagement within Constraints of the High School Classroom

In November of 2012 Anne and youth researcher Marcel invited ninth grade students from Hamilton High School to participate in a survey on their ninth grade experience. A teacher had been asked by the principal to permit Marcel and Anne to meet with the teacher's five classes. In each class there were approximately fifteen students. The students' responses to the survey invitation ranged from arguments that "nothing's gonna change" to their emotional connection with a video produced by youth in a nearby city organizing for change in policing and neighborhood safety policies. Marcel equated voice with political agency. The teacher advised Anne that very few students would take an interest in the survey.

During one of the class periods, the teacher, who was White and grew up in the South, got animated after our reference to the civil rights struggle of the 1960s. Stepping from behind the desk, the teacher spoke to the students:

> Things do change! It was not too long ago that signs told people where to sit or use facilities based on the color of your skin. So much has changed for you, things are so different for you now!

Anne wrote later in her field notes:

> We sit in a classroom in a school with the following demographics: 98% African American/Black, 100% economically disadvantaged, and 29% students with disabilities (higher than the district average). There's a profound irony in this teacher's statement, but the class period is about to end, and the critical analysis needed at this moment will not be accessed. Marcel and I have several more classes to speak to after this one. Our time is limited. This teacher is our point of access to the students. The space for critical engagement is not available to us.

From the Outside Looking In – From the Inside Looking Out: Shifting the Critical Lens

As a collective, we gathered in January of 2013 at the university to review the survey data, prepared by Regina. The team from Hamilton High School focused on the theme of students not getting along with teachers and with their peers, which was evident in the survey data. Data from two questions in particular informed our discussion: "How do students get along with each other in your school?" and "How safe do you feel in school?"

The data were especially salient to the youth researchers because of an incident that had just happened in their school involving a student-on-student fight that led to security and police

involvement and the use of pepper spray on the students. This school was recently rebuilt and the new building generated a great deal of hope about what educational opportunities might be possible at the school. During the meeting, the youth researchers played an excerpt from the evening news that covered the fight. They noted the following in their early analysis of the issue of safety:

> **Marcel:** People say it's the school. I say it's the students.
>
> **Roy:** It's basically gang-on-gang violence. We're put on the middle of [names several local neighborhoods] so basically everybody is beefing with each other, and we all are put in one place, so – they're gonna fight
>
> **Marcel:** We've got a big gym and a small gym and they shoved everybody in the small gym
>
> **Brittany:** It was for the [state tests]
>
> **Marcel:** Because of [state tests], *but*, you know, you can't shove a bunch of kids in the small gym and expect nothing is gonna happen. So there was a couple of fights in the gym
>
> **Marietta:** Nobody broke it up
>
> **Marcel:** Nobody—by the time security got—only one security guard that finally got there

In this exchange among the youth researchers, Marcel initiates his explanation of students as responsible for the violence in his school, echoed by Roy who describes the school at the center of gang activity. However, Marcel soon moves to a structural explanation, noting how overcrowded conditions in a small gym during a week of state testing and insufficient presence of security personnel contributed to the problem of one particular fight.

The youth researchers discussed the way in which the media often portrays youth in a negative manner. The evening newscaster had noted about the rebuilt school facility, "It's absolutely a gorgeous building. However, what you're seeing repeatedly on the inside, it's ugly." The youth researchers talked about what it was like to go to a school with a "bad" reputation, and how it affected the way others view them as students attending the school. In the excerpt below, they noted the repercussions of negative media representation:

> **Carl:** If a school gets a bad reputation they might think…it doesn't matter who you are. If you go to that school, you are a bad kid
>
> **Marietta:** That's like the outside looking in. If you all looked at our school, they like "dang, they're terrible" but us going there it doesn't happen every day. They just catch us on like—
>
> **Brittany:** —the bad days

Marietta: Right, like, ok, "Oh, they do this *all* week."

During this session, each team as well as the broader collective explored the survey results. We considered what ninth grade students reported, placing it in relation to contextual dimensions such as educational policy in the state and district, conditions local to schools and their neighborhoods, and what we have studied of local history. We located the key themes emerging from the survey data and drew connecting arrows to this broader context. See figure 1 for a photograph of a whiteboard reflecting a discussion during our January session.

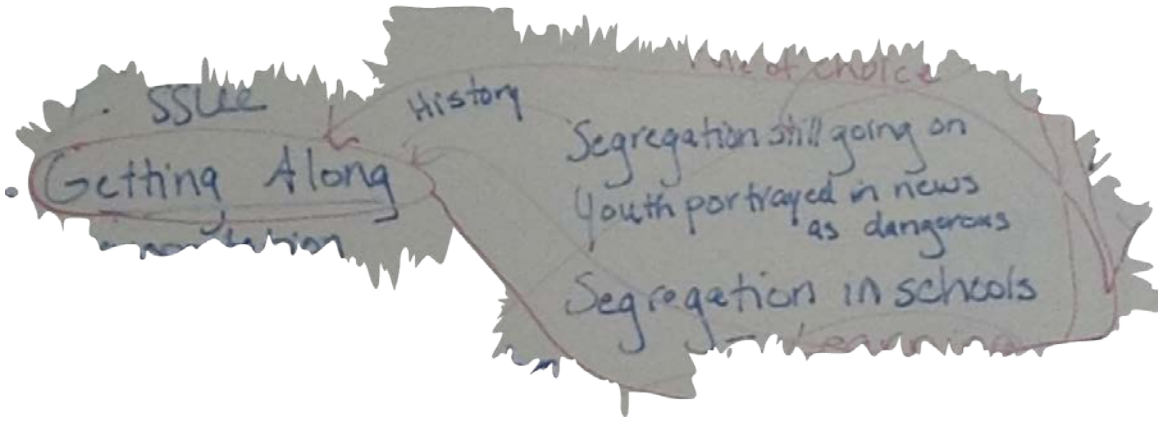

Figure 1. **Discussion points during January PAR collective data analysis meeting held at the university in January 2013.**

Reporting Back to Ninth Grade Students as a Form of Critical Engagement

In preparing their creative product for reporting back to the ninth grade students, the Hamilton youth researchers noted 95% of the students surveyed in their school said they felt "fairly safe" or "very safe" in the school, while 50% of the students reported they got along "poorly" or "very poorly" with other students in the school. The apparent contradiction between students "feeling safe" at the same time they reported "not getting along" became a focus for the broader collective.

In the creative product by the Hamilton team, the youth researchers developed a video that juxtaposed the perspective of the televised evening news with the youth researchers' alternative newscast, which was more nuanced. In the video, Marietta plays the role of a journalist, and she interviews Roy on his views of attending Hamilton. Roy tells her, "I like it. I like the fact that it's a new building and I get a good education there…I feel overall safe. Although we have our ups and downs, fights, and violence, I feel pretty much safe." Similarly, Brittany appears unwilling to cast a sweeping generalization of the school and the students in it, responding, "I feel very safe [pause]. Now look, I don't feel so safe when they be talking about shooting up our schools, and stuff. I don't feel safe." Here the issue of the response to students'

fighting on the part of security guards and police officers is noted, possibly intending to raise questions about the use of pepper spray on students as a means of restoring order.

In March of 2013, Marcel, Brittany, Marietta, and Anne returned to the ninth grade classes of Hamilton High to report back survey results. We spoke to the same five classes of students as we had in the fall. Unlike some other schools surveyed, the response rate for the survey at Hamilton had been very low (20 students). There appeared to have been little interest on the part of the teacher in reminding students to return their consent forms. The teacher's prediction of low turnout became a reality.

However, the creative product, featuring the televised evening news program, negatively characterizing student relations within the building as "ugly," provided considerable engagement on the part of the ninth grade students. The youth researchers' counter-narrative of contradictory feelings of comfort and fear within their school also created the space for thinking about individual and institutional factors contributing to the issue of school safety.

The classroom setting was a challenge for the youth researchers and Anne. It is very likely the students were not told in advance that we would be presenting, so our arrival may have been seen as a school-imposed activity. Nonetheless, here at Hamilton High and across all of the seven schools, when the creative product was featured, the ninth grade students were drawn into the use of poetry, drama, music, and connections with the survey results. The use of performance in some form had durability in the youth researchers' engagement of their peers.

Discussion

As the PAR collective moved more deeply into inquiry, the youth researchers provided valuable information and acted as agents of change in their discussion of the data, interpretation, development of creative products, and returning to the schools to report back their findings and to engage other students to express their voices. This process did not happen immediately nor did it occur in a linear fashion.

It appeared that youth researchers transitioned from a view of themselves as "students" to the role of "youth researchers." The former embedded them in the hierarchical relations of school, encouraging passivity; the latter recognized youth knowledge and nurtured agency, voice, and possibility. Also, their response to the university setting was striking in terms of how the youth researchers participated – taking greater initiative than was evident in the school setting.

In this rich and complex study of youth inquiry and action, we conceptualize a looping process of roles and identities among the youth researchers, moving from a sense of self as "student" to that of "youth researcher" and returning to "student" as the project conditions and settings changed. Passivity tended to occur in the settings of their urban high schools. This process was not necessarily predictable, but it did reveal challenges in efforts to achieve critical engagement with high school youth through the work of the PAR collective. We illustrate this process in Figure 2.

In reflecting on youth agency, we draw on six aspects of agency outlined in a study by Young et al. (2010). These dimensions of agency are reflected in the participants' discourse when they clearly define their goals, seek and provide information, support others during the process of inquiry, participate in decision making, and claim agency for self. Evans, Fox, and Fine (2010) discuss development of new identities that occurs for youth in their experience of PAR, becoming "experts and translators of both their classroom and community experiences" (p.

120). Evans et al. (2010) underscore this movement toward agency, as youth "shift positions from passive receivers/refusors of knowledge and take on the identities of producers and spokespeople for critical knowledges" (p. 120).

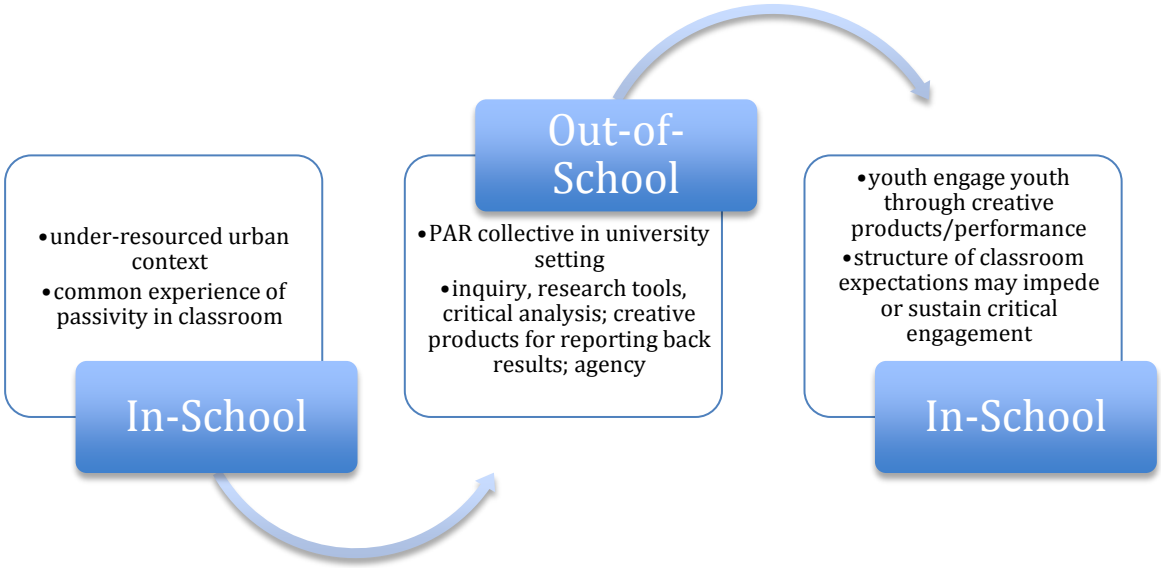

***Figure 2*. Looping of sense of agency among youth researchers within a PAR collective as evident within in-school and out-of-school (university) settings.**

Conclusion and Implications

As evident in the project, there is an experience of agency and passivity as the youth researchers physically and psychologically moved between the experience as a student in an under-resourced school to that of a youth researcher in a university environment. Contributing to the shifts in critical engagement are the spaces that open or shut down inquiry regarding the challenges youth experienced in their school environment. In our study, the spaces supporting inquiry were frequently located at the university. However, under the right conditions of youth leadership and creativity, urban classrooms have the potential for student agency and critical engagement.

Notes

[1] State designations were as follows: excellent, effective, continuous improvement, academic watch, academic emergency. The 2011-2012 district designation was academic emergency.
[2] Journal entries were written or self-videotaped. Journal topics included attention to agency, critical engagement, and aspects of the survey project.

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